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ABSTRACT

Prewriting exercises such as outlines, successive drafts, or free writing are not helpful to students from oral cultures who are unfamiliar with the writing process. Speaking as a rehearsal technique for writing can help nontraditional students formulate and organize ideas before starting the first draft. Speaking as a rehearsal for writing emphasizes social involvement and the sharing of ideas and feedback, and eliminates the stigma of writing as a lonely activity. This six-step technique gradually moves students from speaking to writing. Step one involves talking out or brainstorming thoughts and ideas the topic arouses in the student. These ideas are retrievable by tape recording them or using a partner. In step two, the student determines which aspects of the topic will most interest the audience, and focuses on a thesis statement. Step three involves recording key ideas and discussing supporting points, which results in a rough outline. Presenting the outline orally to a class for feedback on content and organization is an optional fourth step. The student writes the first draft in step five. In step six, the student reads the composed draft aloud and listens to the composition for organizational and editing flaws. Thus, speaking can be used as an editing technique as well. This approach illuminates composition as a process, boosts the nontraditional student's self-esteem, and underscores the concept of audience. (HTH)

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FROM SPEECH TO WRITING: A REHEARSAL MODEL

In his article, "Write Before Writing" (CCC, 1978), Donald Murray introduces the concept of rehearsal for writing. Murray suggests that pre-writing is an integral aspect of the writing process which precedes a first draft. In most classrooms, the rehearsal technique for writing is, simply, writing. Students put words on paper via outlines, writing through a draft, or free-writing. This technique is certainly helpful for many writers; however, rehearsing through writing simply does not work for all students, particularly for students coming out of an oral culture. Unfamiliar with the process of composition, nontraditional students become mired in the early stages of writing. Facing the blank page, they often experience difficulty translating ideas and feelings which they might easily express in the oral mode to the written mode. Even when they are able to commit their ideas to paper, these students experience difficulty developing and organizing their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner.

As teachers of basic skills, we faced the overriding question: How can nontraditional students experience the writing process, especially pre-writing, in a way which is supportive, interesting, and challenging? We found the answer to lie in the student's oral tradition of communication. Specifically, we recommend speaking as a rehearsal technique for writing.

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The concept of rehearsal is certainly not new to anyone in theater. One rehearses--practices--for the theatrical performance. However, the concepts of rehearsal and performance may well be new to other teachers of composition. The notion of rehearsal suggests the preparation over time in which an actor may paraphrase, question, and speak the lines of the text, attempting to fully develop a character; similarly, a writer may talk through ideas about a topic and ask questions to fully develop a thesis. In both cases, the rehearsal technique stresses speaking as a way to formulate ideas. The final performance results in a communicative situation with an audience. The actor performs the part orally before people actually present, whereas a writer performs on paper for an implicit audience of readers.

Our concept of speaking as a rehearsal technique for writing centers around social involvement. One of the discomforts which beginning writers experience with writing is that the process is usually presented as a lonely activity. In contrast, when using speaking as a pre-writing method, they are not tackling the task by themselves. Rather, they are talking out ideas with someone else, a supportive other who can listen, ask questions, elicit ideas, and offer feedback on those ideas. By interacting in a one-to-one or group situation in the classroom, lab, or office, with the teacher or with fellow students, students talk out their ideas with others in preparation for writing. As actors contemplate their roles away from rehearsal, students may be asked to do some reflecting on the topic at home, but the possibilities for developing their ideas, as the possibilities for developing a character, are enlarged when they discuss the topic with others. Energy becomes synergy.

The speak-write rehearsal technique offered here is a step-by-step procedure which gradually moves students from speaking to writing. Using oral communication, students generate ideas, organize their thoughts, and present

them orally in a clear, understandable fashion. As they understand what they want to say and how they want to say it, the students write down major ideas, complete an outline, and develop rough drafts.

To illustrate this process, we will refer throughout to J.R., a model "speak-write" student. J.R. came into the office one day with the assignment to write a paper about his neighborhood. Like many students, his initial response was one of discouragement. "I don't have anything to say on this topic," he insisted. "Not only that, but it doesn't interest me." Also like many students, J.R. found it easier to talk about his neighborhood than to write about it. Yet throughout the process of talking through his ideas with someone else, J.R. discovered, much to his amazement, that he did have plenty to say, and he even had a structure to say it in. What follows are the concrete steps used with J.R. to discuss the topic, steps which comprise the speak-write rehearsal technique.

1) Talking It Out

Following the opener, "Why don't you start by telling me what your paper is about," J.R. began to discuss his neighborhood. He remembered some of the buildings there--city hall, the fire station, various apartment buildings--and some events that might happen there, such as robberies and muggings. (J.R. was very much a street kid.) He also recalled sounds--sirens, screams of neighbors quarreling, high heels clacking on the floor above his apartment. Too, he mentioned the university twelve blocks from his home. J.R. began to realize that he actually did have something to say on the topic.

This stage we call the "Talking It Out" stage. This first phase of the speaking-writing strategy values and encourages the student's full experiencing of all thoughts and feelings which the topic arouses. When students such as J.R. attempt to capture in writing the myriad of ideas and emotions passing

through their consciousnesses, they at times lose their train of thought or become bogged down in the mechanics of transferring the thought from head to hand. An oral approach seems best suited to capturing the spontaneous reactions to the subject under consideration. The student is able to move through a variety of thoughts quickly. By tape recording the session or by using a partner, the ideas on the topic are retrievable. During this brainstorming phase, the student talks through as many ideas about the topic as possible, without evaluation.

2) Finding a Thesis or Purpose

Next came a procedure to isolate a key idea or approach to the topic. Once J.R. realized that he did know something about the topic, he was able to move on to this stage. With some prodding, he decided to use as his central purpose "a description of my neighborhood." In that way, he felt he could best pull together the most important details which he had just remembered. He could use the places and noises of his neighborhood, which seemed to be his key material.

This phase of the speak-write process involves narrowing the student's experience of the topic. By playing back the tape or discussing the ideas with a teacher or student partner, the student can list possible theses for the paper. When reviewing the list, the student might ask these questions: (1) What area of this topic most interests me? (2) What aspect of this topic will be most interesting to an audience? (3) What aspect of the topic do I appear to have the most information about? (4) What are some possible thesis statements I could use? At this point, a thesis statement can be recorded.

3) Organizing and Elaborating on Ideas

J.R. was now asked to consider how he might organize his various details.

He settled on 1) things he saw, 2) things he heard, and 3) a summary paragraph giving his reactions to what he saw and heard. He explored the sights, both inside and outside his apartment building, and the internal and external noises. By discussing the location of various civic buildings in his area and the proximity of his own apartment to school and civic centers, he discovered something he had not previously been fully aware of: that he liked some important features about his neighborhood. Although he disliked the apartment sounds of quarreling and street sounds which disturbed his studying, he did value the location and appearance of some neighborhood buildings. By the time he left the office, he realized not only that he had something to say and was able to organize his thoughts, but also that he had some interest in the topic.

This third phase, then, undertakes elaborating on and organizing ideas which relate to the specific thesis statement or statement of purpose. With a definite focus on the subject area, the student once again talks through the ideas. Again, recording the interaction allows freedom to ponder thoughts. After this discussion, the student may play back the tape or discuss with a partner. The student then selects key ideas and writes them down in sentence form. Under each main idea, the student discusses supporting points and writes them down. (To allow the student to concentrate on generating and organizing ideas, it may be advisable at times for the partner to do the recording.) The student now has a rough outline for an oral or written presentation.

4) Presenting the Paper: Recognizing the Audience (optional)

The rehearsal strategy with J.R. stopped at step three. Working in the classroom, an additional step is possible before the student writes a first draft. That step, an optional one, entails giving a short oral presentation to others from the outline accomplished in step three. By presenting ideas orally to others, the student obtains feedback on the content and organization

of the paper. The audience may ask for a paraphrase of the theme of the speech or for a list of the main ideas. If the audience is unable to do these tasks, the speaker may need to work on a clear purpose statement, more exact topic sentences, and transitions. Questions from the audience may help to clarify problem areas. By speaking the writing, the student becomes aware of audience--the readers of the paper. Just as speakers must present their ideas logically and clearly to an audience, so, too, must writers compose logically and coherently for their audience.

5) Writing the First Draft

The student is now ready to write the first draft of the paper, utilizing the feedback obtained in stage four and the material generated in the earlier stages presented here.

We need to stress here that the rehearsal process is not a substitute for lessons concerning sentences, paragraphs, and diction. The speak-write model focuses on generating ideas (content) and ordering the material (organization). Students will still be expected to learn and apply the conventions of writing and must not be led to believe that transcribing their verbal responses is sufficient. But such applications of the conventions will come in revising and editing stages, not in a rehearsal or pre-writing stage.

In fact, a sixth stage requires the student to read the composed draft aloud to a partner, group, or oneself. Here, the student listens to the composition, looks for organizational flaws, and raises the same kinds of questions as those raised in phase four. Beyond such questions for revision come editing concerns. Has the student written down the words and forms being verbalized? Work with a tape recorder or partner can be of much use here in capturing grammatical, spelling, and punctuation lapses. Thus, using speaking as a rehearsal technique for writing in the preceding manner and, later, as a

revising and editing technique, aids in accomplishing the main objectives of composition.

Several other advantages likewise recommend this approach. First, this systematic procedure illuminates composition as a process. Although the speaking and writing interchange requires a period of time, nontraditional students, especially novice writers, begin to understand the step-by-step course which leads to the final paper. The emphasis becomes, not the written product, but rather the process by which the paper emerged.

Second, this approach boosts the nontraditional student's self image. These students have not had much success in the educational system. In this instance, the student's own personal experience is held in esteem. As they freely express themselves, the students make their own choices regarding content and organization. The students begin to feel better about their ability to write. A related by-product of this approach is that students begin to experience the writing process as something no longer to be dreaded. No longer is it a lonely task which they must perform closeted away in their own rooms; rather, it becomes a social encounter. Instead of a work-oriented project, it becomes a playful, creative experience. Time passes quickly; students can be heard to marvel that "this is fun." Also, through the dialogical social dimension, the possibilities for generating more ideas and supporting details are multiplied. Energy becomes synergistic. The old adage, "Two heads are better than one," is borne out in this process.

Finally, the speak-write strategy underscores the concept of audience. Students, through their oral presentations of their written material, experience the discourse (oral and written) as a shared event. The emphasis of the composing process becomes communication.

The point here is twofold. One, speaking is an extremely important means

of getting writing going--of rehearsing for writing. Two, we as teachers need to help student writers discover the rehearsal methods which work best for each student. By using oral techniques, we can help students in the pre-writing stage of the writing process and can thus help them to improve their writing.